

## Claremont Colleges Scholarship @ Claremont

---

Pomona Senior Theses

Pomona Student Scholarship

---

2018

# Unity in Difference: an Exploration of Spatial Justice and Environmental Justice in Los Angeles

Minah Choi

---

### Recommended Citation

Choi, Minah, "Unity in Difference: an Exploration of Spatial Justice and Environmental Justice in Los Angeles" (2018). *Pomona Senior Theses*. 191.

[http://scholarship.claremont.edu/pomona\\_theses/191](http://scholarship.claremont.edu/pomona_theses/191)

This Open Access Senior Thesis is brought to you for free and open access by the Pomona Student Scholarship at Scholarship @ Claremont. It has been accepted for inclusion in Pomona Senior Theses by an authorized administrator of Scholarship @ Claremont. For more information, please contact [scholarship@cuc.claremont.edu](mailto:scholarship@cuc.claremont.edu).

# “Unity in Difference: an Exploration of Spatial Justice and Environmental Justice in Los Angeles”

Minah Choi

In partial fulfillment of a Bachelor of Arts Degree in Environmental Analysis, 2017-18 academic  
year, Pomona College, Claremont, California

Readers:  
Prof. Wendy Cheng  
Prof. Davis

## Acknowledgements

This project could not have been possible without the support and guidance of my thesis advisor, professor Wendy Cheng, to whom I am so grateful. Thank you to my second reader, professor Ann Davis, for her contributions and edits in the final stages. Also, I'd like to say thank you so much to my friends and family during this process—your never-ending words of love, encouragement, and trust are what got me here. Of course, thank you to Pomona College and the Environmental Analysis department.

## **Table of Contents**

Acknowledgments...p. 2

Introduction...p. 4

Chapter 1...p. 14

Chapter 2...p. 37

Conclusion...p. 56

Works Cited...p. 59

## Introduction

### The Racialized Landscape and the People of Color Environmental Justice Movement

#### *The racialized landscape*

Richard Schein states, “the landscape is not innocent” in his chapter of the book *Everyday America: Cultural Landscape Studies After J.B. Jackson*.<sup>1</sup> He explains that the landscape’s “role in mediating social and cultural reproduction works through its ability to stand for something: norms, values, fears, and so on...those very norms, values, and fears are perpetuated, reproduced, or challenged.”<sup>2</sup> These racialized landscapes make up America’s public parks, schools, and homes—each with a history that demonstrates America’s affinity to privilege whiteness in these socio-spatial relationships. The concept of a “racialized landscape” invites observers to look at a landscape with a deeper point of view—to look at the landscape with a critical lens that questions the common perceptions of race and space. Who is being represented in this landscape? Who is being excluded and how? These are the kind of broad questions that should be asked when looking at everyday landscapes. Schein argues, “it is not hard to imagine a cultural landscape reflecting dominant norms and values regarding race in the United States...we need only trace the twentieth-century historical geographies of racial zoning, racial covenants, and redlining.”<sup>3</sup> The landscape is “both a material thing and a conceptual framing of the world—a visual and spatial epistemology.” In the most recent decades, there has been a movement in scholarship to contextualize and understand everyday landscapes with frameworks based in gender, class, race, power, and political economy. This trend is “taking seriously the assumption

---

<sup>1</sup> Richard H. Schein, “Normative Dimensions of Landscape,” in *Everyday America: Cultural Landscape Studies After J.B. Jackson* (University of California Press, 2003), 199–218.

<sup>2</sup> Richard H. Schein.

<sup>3</sup> Richard H. Schein.

behind J.B. Jackson's concern for the landscape as capable of providing for social change."<sup>4</sup> The racialized landscape often reflects the inequality and injustice of American history, but this "common sense" understanding of power and race can be challenged, dismantled, and changed. By locating the normative aspects of racialized landscapes, Schein suggests, "we open possibilities for denaturalizing the appearance and operation of that scene."<sup>5</sup> Heartwarming, the possibilities for dismantling racialized landscapes not only exist, but also are growing. "The possibilities for individual agency, the power to challenge such structures" are taking place in justice-seeking movements across the United States.

When thinking about organizing to dismantle the power dynamics of the racialized landscape the environmental justice movement comes to mind. The environmental justice movement emerged to battle environmental racism, which is the "the unequal distribution of environmental benefits and pollution burdens based on race." In a report by the Commission for Racial Justice, the first national study to correlate waste facility sites and demographic characteristics, "race was found to be the most potent variable in predicting where these facilities were located – more powerful than poverty, land values, and home ownership."<sup>6</sup> This report published the environmental inequality "people of color have known about and have been living...for decades."<sup>7</sup> This report catalyzed "local and often isolated community-based struggles against toxics and facility siting [to blossom] into a multiissue, multiethnic, and multiregional movement."<sup>8</sup> The environmental justice movement has been able to organize around identity and

---

<sup>4</sup> Richard H. Schein.

<sup>5</sup> Richard H. Schein.

<sup>6</sup> Robert D. Bullard, "Phylon: Vol. 49, No. 3, 4, 2001 Environmental Justice in the 21st Century: Race Still Matters," *Phylon* (1960-) 52, no. 1 (2015): 72–94.

<sup>7</sup> Bullard.

<sup>8</sup> Robert D. Bullard, *Unequal Protection : Environmental Justice and Communities of Color* (San Francisco : Sierra Club Books, 1994).

a diversity of experiences with the racialized landscape by creating a unitary people of color identity. This framework of organizing around identity has resulted in a people of color environmental justice movement.

*The people of color environmental justice identity—the Summit*

The National People of Color Environmental Leadership Summit in 1991 formalized the environmental justice's people of color identity and movement at "the First National People of Color Environmental Leadership Summit Principles of Environmental Justice." Over 300 participants from all over the country, joined by delegates from Puerto Rico, Canada, Latin America, and the Marshall Islands, gathered in Washington D.C. to transform a movement.<sup>9</sup> "The Summit broadened the environmental justice movement beyond its early anti-toxics focus to include issues of public health, worker safety, land use, transportation, housing, resource allocation, and community empowerment."<sup>10</sup> With the development of the unified people of color identity, activists came together in the nation's capital to demonstrate the need of a multi-ethnic environmental justice movement. The monumental summit created a space for people of color to reaffirm their identities in relation to the environment and redefine the conventional environmental movement to include this newly developing racial identity. New parameters for the future of the environmental justice movement were established at the leadership summit, all created and discussed with the people of color identity at the forefront.

These new parameters were officially sanctioned in the Principles of Environmental Justice, solidifying the people of color identity within the environmental justice movement. This

---

<sup>9</sup> Dana Alston, "The Summit: Transforming a Movement," *The Summit* 2, no. 3/4 (1991), <http://www.reimaginerpe.org/20years/alston>.

<sup>10</sup> Bullard, "Phylon."

document in some ways institutionalized the framework within greater environmentalism, making the need for a people of color centric environmental justice movement impossible to dismiss. Of the seventeen principles, there are five that are particularly pertinent to the environmental justice movement in Los Angeles and the importance of coalition building in the development of justice-seeking movement.

*Principle 5.* Environmental Justice affirms the fundamental right to political, economic, cultural and environmental self-determination of all peoples.

*Principle 7.* Environmental Justice demands the right to participate as equal partners at every level of decision-making including needs assessment, planning, implementation, enforcement and evaluation.

*Principle 8.* Environmental Justice affirms the right of all workers to a safe and healthy work environment, without being forced to choose between an unsafe livelihood and unemployment. It also affirms the right of those who work at home to be free environmental hazards.

*Principle 9.* Environmental Justice protects the right of victims of environmental injustice to receive full compensation and reparations for damages as well as quality health care.

*Principle 16.* Environmental Justice calls for the education of present and future generations which emphasizes social and environmental issues, based on our experience and an appreciation of our diverse cultural perspectives.<sup>11</sup>

The principles highlighted above emphasize the need to approach environmental justice organizing as a movement to increase the visibility of historically marginalized communities in spaces that are not included in the mainstream environmental movement. By demanding the “right to participate as equal partners at every level of decision-making” the movement makes a call to action to shift power dynamics to include people of color in policy-making decisions that directly affect the health and environments of their communities.<sup>12</sup> The Principles of Environmental Justice are a call for accountability measures to create sustainable communities that will produce tangible improvements for communities of color and low income. These conditions for environmental justice organizing created the framework for people of color to

---

<sup>11</sup> “The First National People of Color Environmental Leadership Summit: Principles of Environmental Justice,” *Race, Poverty & the Environment* 2, no. 3/4 (1991): 32–31.

<sup>12</sup> “The First National People of Color Environmental Leadership Summit.”



have agency in the political field, united under common theoretical principles. The Principles of Environmental Justice are “a well developed environmental ideological framework that explicitly links ecological concerns with labor and social justice concerns.”<sup>13</sup> The people of color environmental justice identity connected the environmental justice movement with wider social justice movements that would create a more inclusive justice-seeking movement. The people of color identity’s ability to create coalitions that encompassed a wide range of social issues is crucial to thinking about Los Angeles’ environmental justice movement.

Through the Principles of Environmental Justice, multi-ethnic coalitions were formed to recognize the diversity of their oppression to recognize and resist common foes.<sup>14</sup> Although the Summit took place before the civil unrest of 1992 in Los Angeles, environmental justice’s people of color identity created an organizing framework to address the tensions that had been building for generations before the explosion of violence on the streets of Los Angeles. After the L.A. riots, activists of color in the regional environmental justice movement would continue organizing around identity, and furthering the environmental justice people of color identity’s goal of a multi-ethnic resistance network. Like many activists and social justice scholars have stated, the 1992 riots sparked innovative organizing strategies to engage with the deep social inequalities that had shaped Los Angeles’ urban landscape.<sup>15</sup> The Principles of Environmental Justice secured a framework for ethnic coalitions and local organizations in Los Angeles to find solidarity in their similar experiences with hegemonic power dynamics, and to in many ways

---

<sup>13</sup> Julian Agyeman, *Sustainable Communities and the Challenge of Environmental Justice* (New York, UNITED STATES: NYU Press, 2005),

<http://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/claremont/detail.action?docID=865319>.

<sup>14</sup> “A Call to Action,” *Race, Poverty & the Environment* 2, no. 3/4 (1991): 30–31.

<sup>15</sup> Laura Pulido, *Black, Brown, Yellow, and Left: Radical Activism in Los Angeles*, c2006.

overcome tensions around identity politics that seemed to previously stagnate environmental justice theory and activism.

The environmental justice movement before the summit in 1991 was already challenging racial hegemony by creating anti-toxic campaigns and bringing the discussion of racism to the mainstream movement of environmentalism, but the Summit was a crucial component in the national movement to address the need for multi-ethnic coalition building for a sustainable social movement. The romantic perception of environmentalism is a product of the racial hierarchy and in its original form was not addressing the social ills connected to environmental degradation. The inclusion of the people of color identity would expand the building environmental justice movement to approach racial inequality in the landscape with a critical spatial perspective. The 1991 summit was not the start of the environmental justice movement, but it established a framework of inclusive environmental justice organizing that would open up the possibilities for collaboration, coalition-building, and critical spatial analysis. The solidification of the people of color identity and the seventeen Principles of Environmental Justice propelled the mainly anti-toxics focused movement towards a more spatially, community-based unionism approach to environmental racism.<sup>16</sup> Environmental justice would become a significant part of the larger spatial justice consciousness that had been building in Los Angeles. The summit contextualized the position of the environmental justice movement within a greater set of organizing strategies that aim to further the work being done by other justice-based coalitions in the region. The outcomes of the summit in Washington D.C. established a unitary identity that expanded the scope of the environmental justice movement. In terms of Los Angeles, the summit strengthened

---

<sup>16</sup> Laura Pulido, “Development of the ‘People of Color’ Identity in the Environmental Justice Movement of the Southwestern United States,” *Socialist Review* 26 (1996): 145–80.

the regional movement's potential by connecting it to a macro-movement and placing it within the city's increasing spatial perspective.

The environmental justice movement serves as an example of an oppositional movement that is engaging with the nuances of the people of color identity and addressing the challenges found within multi-ethnic coalition building. The environmental justice movement has embraced the idea that race is a social relation, and the different racial experiences of communities of color to create a unifying identity versus a totalizing identity.<sup>17</sup> In organizing social movements, a shared identity is a necessary basis for collective action. However, how this shared identity is created, defined, and supported varies from one social movement to the next. The racial dimensions in the environmental justice movement aims to prioritize the politics of difference and positionality, which in turn minimizes the harmful abstractions of claims to justice. Environmental racism has served as a catalyst in creating cooperative interaction among nonwhites. That's not to say that the environmental justice movement has not failed in navigating identity politics. However, the movement today seeks to organize around a *situational identity*, which serves to unite various heterogeneous groups while still allowing for individual racial group identification—here the key to revolutionary movement is highlighted.<sup>18</sup> The differences found in racial experiences strengthen the scope of justice based organizing, making the subsequent movements and activism better equipped to address the nuances of a multiracial, multiclass, multi-interest landscape. This situational racial identity challenges the racial binary of former movements. Environmental justice is a space for people of color to collectively dismantle racial hegemony enables the environmental justice movement to develop increasingly innovative strategies for organizing. This framework for organizing around identity in the people of color

---

<sup>17</sup> Laura Pulido.

<sup>18</sup> Laura Pulido.

environmental justice movement puts people of the color at the center of leadership and advocacy. The people of color environmental justice movement has employed a racial formation perspective, which allows for the redefinition of race's role in the representation and structuring of the social role. A racial formation perspective avoids "both the utopian framework which sees race as an illusion we can somehow "get beyond," and also the essentialist formulation which sees race as something objective and fixed."<sup>19</sup> Racial formation is dependent on the socio-historical process and an ongoing dimension of human representation, therefore it has the capacity to be transformed to form a more landscape.

*Roadmap: the story of Los Angeles' social justice movements*

Employing the perspective of a racialized landscape in this thesis, some of the questions that arise are, how do the connections between race, place, and power shape the environmental justice movement in Los Angeles? In what ways does L.A.'s relationship between these socio-spatial factors make the environmental justice movement distinct from other environmental justice movements in, what is called today, the United States? How is environmental justice activism being pushed to think more spatially in Los Angeles and what organizations contribute to this expansion of the environmental justice movement? This thesis will grapple with these posed questions in the following ways. The first chapter will discuss environmental justice and spatial justice, both individually and then in relation to each other. The discussion of environmental justice will explore the theory and history of the environmental justice movement both nationally and locally, paying special attention to Los Angeles' multi-ethnic coalition building that took place in the 1980s. By understanding the framework of environmental justice,

---

<sup>19</sup> Michael Omi and Howard Winant, in *Racial Formation in the United States*, Third edition. (New York : Routledge/Taylor & Francis Group, 2015), 48–91.

the shortcomings of the environmental justice movement can be addressed to be more inclusionary of other socio-spatial concerns. The analysis of spatial justice, a framework that has been popularized by geography scholar Edward Soja, will follow and contextualize the spatial consciousness of community-based activism in Los Angeles after 1992 and the emergence of the immigrant rights movement. Spatial justice is important to include in environmental justice discourse because it pushes environmental justice scholarship and activism to think more critically about the racialized landscape. The relationship between environmental justice and spatial justice will employ a syncretic approach that “denotes qualities key to crafting the kinds of motivated methodologies that enable the continuum of scholarly research as political experimentation.”<sup>20</sup>

The three steps of syncretism—stretch, resonance, and resilience—will be further discussed in the second chapter, analyzing their relationship to environmental justice and spatial justice activism and activism scholarship. The first example discussed in the second chapter is the Koreatown Immigrant Workers Alliance’s (KIWA) urban garden project called Ktown Farms. This green space project in the Koreatown neighborhood of Los Angeles is an example of the frameworks of immigrant rights and environmental justice coming together. KIWA as an organization is notable in the examination of Los Angeles’ environmental justice movement because of its unique approach to social justice organizing. The second example of community-based environmental justice organizing discussed in the second chapter is the air sensor project at Mark Keppel High School. This project is part of an environmental justice organization’s youth community-based research program in the San Gabriel Valley. Mark Keppel High School

---

<sup>20</sup> Ruth Wilson Gilmore, “Forgotten Places and the Seeds of Grassroots Planning,” in *Engaging Contradictions: Theory, Politics, and Methods of Activist Scholarship*, ed. Charles R. Hale (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2008).

partnered with the Asian American studies department at Pitzer College to create a lasting social justice project. This coalition between Mark Keppel High School, a public high school with a student body that is majority students of color, and Pitzer College, a institution of higher education in Claremont, CA, challenges distributional environmental justice to dig deeper when thinking critically about socio-spatial relationships that created landscapes characterized by uneven distributions of environmental burdens. These two examples challenge environmental justice organizing and scholarship to engage with practical syncretism to create an environmental justice movement that aims to create systemic, sustainable, long-term change.

This thesis engages with a variety of complex socio-spatial concepts that shape the formation of the social, political, and economic landscape. The two examples of spatial and environmental justice discussed in this work are analyzed using a syncretic approach in hopes of broadening the scope of environmental justice scholarship. By applying environmental and spatial justice to the two examples of coalition building, it is important to see how these relate to create a more flexible and adaptable environmental justice movement. Through unity, not uniformity, environmental justice activism and its scholarship can continue on this path of becoming a “master frame” that is applicable to multiple movements and fully embrace the syncretic practicisim outlined in the beginning of this presentation.<sup>21</sup> To fully stretch, engage resonance, and embody resilience, environmental justice and spatial justice will mutually grow as movements to address inequalities in the landscape. Social justice movements and their organizing strategies experience success, big and small, failure, and growth. Through these processes of social mobilization, there is always something to learn and, in many cases, unlearn when seeking a spatially conscious landscape.

---

<sup>21</sup> Julie Sze and Jonathan K. London, “Environmental Justice at the Crossroads,” *Sociology Compass* 2, no. 4 (2008): 1331–54.

## **Chapter 1**

### **Environmental Justice, Spatial Justice, and the Syncretic: Los Angeles as a setting**

#### *Why Los Angeles?*

The rapid economic and social change that took place in Los Angeles during the 20<sup>th</sup> century led to the emergence of community-based justice movements seen today. Los Angeles' growth of low-wage organizing "developed in context of dramatic social and economic changes that reshaped southern California starting in the 1970." Low-wage work increased "as globalization, deregulation, and neoliberal economic restructuring undermined both labor unions and labor law enforcement, historically the twin bulwarks of protection for workers' living standards." Immense economic expansion in Los Angeles happened in conjunction with a widening wealth gap, a rapid spread of labor law violations, and a significant wave of new immigrants. "The great transformation was by no means limited to Los Angeles, but it began earlier and developed especially quickly there, which in turn helped to galvanize the efforts of local unions and NGOS."

The latter half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century would be a sharp contrast to the past when looking at who predominantly worked in the low-wage work that "was keeping with the region's earlier history." In the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century the L.A. working class was predominantly U.S.-born, but "today immigrants comprise over a third of the city's population and close to half of its overall workforce." Immigrants in Los Angeles "concentrated in the city's manufacturing, construction, and service industries, where wages are low, benefits scarce, and labor law violations widespread." The changing demographics of the workforce in Los Angeles would cause the former framework of unionism to shift its focus towards organizing around issues identity and people of color. It is imperative understand that the poor labor conditions were not

caused by the large migration of undocumented immigrants. “Rather the deterioration of pay and conditions in these jobs largely *preceded* the immigrant influx.” Higher levels of immigrant employment should be seen as a consequence of a racialized landscape, rather than a cause of labor condition deterioration. On the flip side, the increasing flow of immigrants to southern California would revive the dwindling labor movement approaching the end of the century. The late twentieth century posed new challenges for traditional approaches to labor justice organizing. The changing racialized landscape forced Los Angeles to depart from the traditional form of unionism to create its own framework of organizing.

Los Angeles is the “national pacesetter in the new wave of low-wage worker organizing and advocacy.”<sup>22</sup> Ruth Milkman describes the city’s prolific labor-justice organizing as “a linchpin of the city’s growing reputation as a unique urban laboratory of progressive political experimentation.”<sup>23</sup> Throughout the United States, union and community-based activism campaigns among low-wage workers have increased in the past decades. Los Angeles is considered one of the first major cities to recognize and effectively act upon the city’s potential for a grassroots movement among low-wage workers. Los Angeles Labor social justice organizing overall has not completely reversed decades of economic injustice—unfair pay, dangerous working conditions, and employment insecurity—for those at the bottom of the labor market. However, these social movements have increased public awareness of low-wage worker issues and politicized underrepresented communities. The labor social justice activism framework has been able to organize across diverse communities that are concerned about a variety of social, racial, and political issues. The immigrant rights movement has become

---

<sup>22</sup> Milkman Ruth, Joshua Bloom, and Victor Narro, *Working for Justice : The L.A. Model of Organizing and Advocacy* (NY, UNITED STATES: Cornell University Press, 2010), <http://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/claremont/detail.action?docID=3137959>.

<sup>23</sup> Ruth, Bloom, and Narro.



increasingly salient to multi-ethnic coalition building since much of the low-wage labor force are undocumented immigrants.<sup>24</sup> Los Angeles has one of the largest concentrations of undocumented immigrants in the country and some of the most politically active immigrants in the country—in 2006, Los Angeles saw the largest and most dynamic protests against vindictive immigration reform, which demonstrated the strength and variety of the city’s community-based activism that had been in the works since the 1980s.

Nongovernmental organizations known as *worker centers* have been at the heart of community-based organizing, using strategies that focus on serving local needs but are contributing to a growing network of union organizing. Collaboration between work centers is crucial to forming sustained social justice movements. This cooperative framework of organizing is especially seen in Los Angeles, where it is common for community-based organizations to regularly work with each other to share strategies and build coalitions to collectively challenge hegemonic social structures. In a study done by Janice Fine, it was observed that Los Angeles’ community-based organizations were more well networked than any of their counterparts in other cities across the country.<sup>25</sup> “Local networks...in Los Angeles enable worker centers to aggregate their resources and magnify their impacts...in cities like New York, Chicago, and San Francisco, no such local networks of worker centers currently exist.”<sup>26</sup> Historically, worker centers have rejected conventional trade unions, considering the traditional approach as too outdated and bureaucratic to address local concerns, especially considering Los Angeles’ high

---

<sup>24</sup> Milkman Ruth, Joshua Bloom, and Victor Narro, *Working for Justice : The L.A. Model of Organizing and Advocacy* (NY, UNITED STATES: Cornell University Press, 2010), <http://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/claremont/detail.action?docID=3137959>.

<sup>25</sup> Ruth, Bloom, and Narro.

<sup>26</sup> Ruth, Bloom, and Narro.

concentration of undocumented immigrants.<sup>27</sup> This skepticism was mutual—unions were unsure of work centers’ strategies when approaching immigrant organizing as they too were advocating and creating leadership development in immigrant communities during the 1970s and 80s.<sup>28</sup>

However with time, as work centers began gaining traction in Los Angeles, unions and work centers began converging their strategies and organizing models to create a hybrid approach to organizing that is unique to Los Angeles. “An emerging synthesis of union and worker center strategies...is rooted in the social ferment of contemporary Los Angeles.”<sup>29</sup> This synthesis of union and worker center organizing creates a distinct political landscape that facilitates coalition building across justice-based advocacy organizations. The Los Angeles model “is less the product of organizational competition than of an interactive process of organizational cross-fertilization within a vibrant local advocacy network.”<sup>30</sup> The economic justice organizing approach in Los Angeles takes into account various micro- and macro-consequences of globalization, demonstrating a complex model of justice-based organizing and advocacy that is quite all encompassing.<sup>31</sup> It allows for social-justice organizing to unite activism surrounding spatial and racial issues, which is where the city’s environmental justice movement comes in. The approach to labor social justice organizing provides a framework for environmental issues to be part of a larger socio-spatial context. Los Angeles as a setting for socio-spatial justice organizing allows the environmental justice movement to further engage with race and space in a more complex way. It forces environmental justice organizing to think about the nuances of race and how to organize around distinct identities, but within the same

---

<sup>27</sup> Ruth, Bloom, and Narro.

<sup>28</sup> Ruth, Bloom, and Narro.

<sup>29</sup> Ruth, Bloom, and Narro.

<sup>30</sup> Ruth, Bloom, and Narro.

<sup>31</sup> Ruth, Bloom, and Narro.

movement for justice. Economic restructuring, massive immigration, and intergroup tensions are simultaneously creating and results of residential segregation by race and environmental inequality. Los Angeles is a multi-ethnic city that provides us contoured landscape that forces us to understand the power dynamics of racial segregation, environmental racism, and urban development. The environmental justice movement in Los Angeles is an example of how environmentalism, locally and nationally, should engage with race and class to become part of this framework of collaborative social justice organizing, which is seen in the relationships between worker centers and unions within the city's social justice labor movement. Los Angeles provides an important backdrop for the study of the environmental justice movement because it is a compelling example of how to approach environmental justice in urban areas for building long-term movements. The position of environmental concerns within the greater community-based movement reflects the necessary interpretation of environmental justice's multidimensionality.

### *Environmental Justice as a framework*

The environmental justice movement is one of the most successful oppositional movements to injustices in the landscape today. The history and origins of the United States' environmental justice movement are well documented.<sup>32</sup> Stemming from the Civil Rights Movement, the environmental justice movement emerged after the United Church of Christ published a study called *Toxic Waste and Race in the United States* in 1987.<sup>33</sup> This study determined that race was the most notable variable in relation to the location of hazardous waste

---

<sup>32</sup> Bullard, *Unequal Protection : Environmental Justice and Communities of Color*.

<sup>33</sup> Bullard, "Phylon."

sites and pollution.<sup>34</sup> The report stated, “The possibility that these patterns resulted by chance is virtually impossible, strongly suggesting that some underlying factor or factors, which are related to race, played a role in the location of commercial hazardous waste facilities.”<sup>35</sup> The study also coined the term environmental racism, which is “the unequal distribution of environmental benefits and pollution burdens based on race.”<sup>36</sup> In 1992 the National Law Journal conducted an investigation race and protection from environmental hazards—the report explains that the penalties for environmental pollution committed in white communities were 500 percent higher than penalties in nonwhite communities.<sup>37</sup> These quantitative reports provided undeniable evidence of the environmental racism responsible for shaping racialized landscapes. The environmental justice movement’s core concerns over the unequal burden of environmental pollution and the risks that come with waste and industrial sites, and the distribution of these sites in relation to race and class, established a distinct approach to mainstream environmentalism.

With the expansion of environmental justice research’s scope, there have been material and theoretically driven dimensions of broadening what is included in environmental justice and how to develop this progressive socio-spatial movement. According to an examination of the

---

<sup>34</sup> “Toxic Waste and Race in the United States: A National Report on the Racial and Socio-Economic Characteristics of Communities with Hazardous Waste Sites” (the United Church of Christ Commission for Racial Justice, 1987), <https://www.nrc.gov/docs/ML1310/ML13109A339.pdf>.

<sup>35</sup> “Toxic Waste and Race in the United States: A National Report on the Racial and Socio-Economic Characteristics of Communities with Hazardous Waste Sites.”

<sup>36</sup> Julie. Sze, *Noxious New York : The Racial Politics of Urban Health and Environmental Justice*, 1 online resource (x, 282 pages) : illustrations, vols., Urban and Industrial Environments; Urban and Industrial Environments. (Cambridge, Mass. : MIT Press, 2007), EBSCOhost <http://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&scope=site&db=nlebk&db=nlabk&AN=173441>.

<sup>37</sup> Marianne Lavelle and Marcia Coyle, “Unequal Protection: The Racial Divide In Environmental Law, A Special Investigation,” *The National Law Journal*, 15, no. 3 (September 21, 1992).

content of environmental justice movement websites, there are over fifty distinct issues the movement is trying to address.<sup>38</sup> This pluralistic and expansive framing of environmental justice is part of a greater theoretical shift towards understanding “just sustainability” and contextualizing the origins of environmental justice in a greater movement towards spatial justice.<sup>39</sup> Intentionality of environmental racism is evolving to better incorporate a contoured understanding of structural racism and intersections of race and class, as well as a variety of other forms of social difference.<sup>40</sup> A procedural justice framework has taken a greater role in the environmental justice movement to move beyond questions of distribution and organize around the reclamation of the democratic process.<sup>41</sup> Justice theory in practice has emphasized the role of process, procedure, and recognition in the formation of a racialized landscape. Procedural environmental justice works to increase visibility and representation of communities of color in the process of justice restitution and regulation, decision-making, and information accessibility to protect and fight for where they live, work, and play.

“Environmental inequality’ has emerged more recently to encompass both additional factors that associated with disproportionate environmental impacts such as class, gender, immigration status, as well as the inter-connections between these factors.”<sup>42</sup> Sze highlights an Environmental Inequality Framework by scholar Pellow in her article “Environmental Justice at the Crossroads” to explain the relationship between environmental justice, environmental racism,

---

<sup>38</sup> Robert Benford, *The Half-Life of the Environmental Justice Frame: Innovation, Diffusion, and Stagnation*, 2005.

<sup>39</sup> Agyeman, *Sustainable Communities and the Challenge of Environmental Justice*.

<sup>40</sup> Laura Pulido, “Rethinking Environmental Racism: White Privilege and Urban Development in Southern California,” *Annals of the Association of American Geographers* 90, no. 1 (March 1, 2000): 12–40, <https://doi.org/10.1111/0004-5608.00182>.

<sup>41</sup> Gordon Walker, “Beyond Distribution and Proximity: Exploring the Multiple Spatialities of Environmental Justice,” *Antipode* 41, no. 4 (September 1, 2009): 614–36, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-8330.2009.00691.x>.

<sup>42</sup> Sze and London, “Environmental Justice at the Crossroads.”

and environmental inequity. In Pellow's framework, "environmental injustice is not just a single harmful event/action/result, but rather a complicated history of political, social, and economic interactions leading up to, and continuing beyond the contested instance of perceived injustice."<sup>43</sup> This idea of intentionality is further discussed by Pulido in her article "Rethinking Environmental Racism: White Privilege and Urban Development in Southern California." Pulido states, "while most social science scholars acknowledge institutional and structural racism, popular understandings focus heavily on individual malicious intent."<sup>44</sup> Intentionality limits racism to siting and impose the requirement of intentionality, which decreases the importance of structural inequality when thinking about environmental racism. Therefore, Pulido argues for the framing of racism in environmental racism research around the concept of white privilege, "which offers a more structural and spatial understanding of racism."<sup>45</sup> Another consideration when thinking about environmental justice scholarship is the decision to use environmental inequality in place of racism to make environmental justice's approach more inclusive to affected populations such as low-income white communities. However, there are strengths to organizing around race in environmental justice, and decentralizing race in environmental justice would go against the new parameters for environmental justice organizing set in the Summit.<sup>46</sup>

As the environmental justice movement goes beyond distributional justice, environmental justice theorists often contend that universal definitions for *environmental justice*, *environmental racism*, and *environmental equity* need to be established.<sup>47</sup> However, these terms continue to be

---

<sup>43</sup> Sze and London.

<sup>44</sup> Pulido, "Rethinking Environmental Racism: White Privilege and Urban Development in Southern California."

<sup>45</sup> Pulido.

<sup>46</sup> Sze and London, "Environmental Justice at the Crossroads."

<sup>47</sup> Ryan Holifield, "Defining Environmental Justice and Environmental Racism," *Urban Geography* 22, no. 1 (2013): 78–90.

defined differently by various political actors based on their positionality in the movement and the needs of local stakeholders. Interpretations of environmental justice, racism and equity are based on their respective geographic, political, historical, and institutional contexts. Therefore, a universal definition of these terms is not necessarily crucial for the development of the environmental justice movement. Utilizing a situational application of environmental justice research leaves room for adaptability in socio-spatial movements. Moving forward, environmental justice research has to further engage with the variegated perspectives and intentions of the stakeholders and organize beyond the initial questions of distribution.

To create a movement that facilitates the integration of other social justice movements into its framework is key to producing a more resilient and multidimensional environmental justice movement. Effective environmental justice discussions have to focus on a broader definition of justice that is not restricted by “militant localism” that has previously restricted the scope of its work.<sup>48</sup> Some spatial scholars with romantic notions of environmentalism have centered the physical and natural casualties of environmental degradation, narrowing its potential to contribute to larger class and labor struggles.<sup>49</sup> The question of *how* to implement procedural justice poses a major challenge for the environmental justice movement. The environmental justice discipline’s self-reflection of the meanings of justice “signals the need to unsettle and make visible the subjectivities that lie dormant in environmental justice scholarship.”<sup>50</sup> As the environmental justice movement’s plurality and applicability broadens, the role of environmental justice in greater social justice movements becomes increasingly important to further

---

<sup>48</sup> Edward W. Soja, *Seeking Spatial Justice*, Globalization and Community Series 16 (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2010).

<sup>49</sup> Edward W. Soja.

<sup>50</sup> Anna Stanley, “Just Space or Spatial Justice? Difference, Discourse, and Environmental Justice,” *Local Environment* 14, no. 10 (November 2009): 999–1014, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13549830903277417>.

conceptions of spatiality and injustice. Scholarship provides a theoretical framework to analyze how these landscapes formed and what actors influenced the unequal landscapes. However, it is crucial to tie this analysis of the spatiality of environmental justice to the communities putting these understandings of justice into practice.

### *Multi-ethnic coalition building as a framework for EJ in Los Angeles*

As progressive social movements in the 21<sup>st</sup> century continue to grow and succeed throughout various social struggles, the “internal contradictories of identity politics” simultaneously become more complex and pronounced in scholarship and everyday activist struggles. Navigating the field of political organizing and a growing number of multi-ethnic communities is one of the more important struggles of the postmodern form of organizing.<sup>51</sup> Multi-ethnic coalition building would take into consideration the histories of metropolitan areas and work to address social issues from the basis of common interests forged by the dominant culture’s discrimination based on race and class. This assumption of unity based on shared experiences of injustice is much easier said than done. The challenge is to create a lasting movement that unifies under the awareness of difference but continues to mobilize together beyond specific sites of collaboration. People of color in the United States have had diverse interests based on their experiences with whiteness and the racial hierarchy—varying histories have influenced the nature of their respective relationships to the people of color identity. The combinations of race, class, and gender and immigration status plays a crucial role in the formation of these intergroup dynamics in Los Angeles, often posing major difficulties in creating solidarity within communities of color. This does not suggest that the intersection of

---

<sup>51</sup> Laura Pulido, “Development of the ‘People of Color’ Identity in the Environmental Justice Movement of the Southwestern United States.”



these varying interests only serve as an impediment to the development of a multi-ethnic organizing space in metropolitan areas, it instead asks oppositional movements to start organizing around questions concerning diversity and positionality—creating this space for a new wave of multi-ethnic coalition building that focuses on community-based unionism in seeking justice.

### *The LANCER project and its legacy*

The LANCER project was one of the earliest examples of multi-ethnic coalition building in the environmental justice movement of Los Angeles, and catalyzed a multidimensional approach to environmental issues in the city. The activism against the LANCER project was part of a social trend amongst communities of color at the time where the urban environment should be seen as a space that needs to be and deserves to be protected. The LANCER project and the many groups involved in organizing against the incinerator would set a precedent for the way the future of environmental justice organizing would take place in the region. Air pollution set the groundwork for a high level of community activism in low-income and communities of color, and the proposed waste-to-energy incinerator was an ideal platform for the variety of organizing groups to converge and address environmental racism from a diversity of perspectives. In the mid-1980s, the city of Los Angeles proposed placing the incinerator in South Central, a predominantly African American neighborhood, to address the city's growing waste problem. This would fall into the established national history of imposing the weight of environmental issues on the shoulders of systematically disadvantaged urban communities. Public authorities failed to understand the racial and spatial injustices that were side effects of what seemed to be

equity-oriented policy decisions.<sup>52</sup> Here equality was prioritized without understanding the restrictive nature of this kind of procedural justice policy. Within the network of POC organizing communities a new consciousness was raised about the negative spatial and environmental effects of public projects like the LANCER project.

In August 1985, the city of Los Angeles held a community meeting to discuss the plans for the incineration plant. According to a Los Angeles Times article, the city's Bureau of Sanitation Department of Public Works showed a film presentation at the meeting that explained "how the towering, \$170-million plant...would use state-of-the-art technology to burn tons of household trash to make electric power. This would provide both electricity and jobs to the community."<sup>53</sup> Project officials were not addressing the highly toxic compounds that would be released from the plant, nor were they concerned about the waste the proposed 24/7 plant would produce. Community members "had a thousand questions" but the project managers seemed unaware of the social or environmental side effects.<sup>54</sup> Residents were rightfully concerned—and the same day of the city meeting, they organized to form the Concerned Citizens of South-Central Los Angeles (CCOSCLA), which would become one of the major multi-ethnic coalitions in the area. An activist on the LANCER project stated that the members of the CCOSCLA "saw it as a health threat, but [they] also considered it an environmental issue."<sup>55</sup> Community members, university professors, and a county health commissioner made up the coalition that led to the city's decision to drop the plans. The coalition members working against the LANCER

---

<sup>52</sup> Michael J. Dear, H. Eric Shockman, and Greg Hise, eds., "Multiracial Organizing Among Environmental Justice Activists in Los Angeles," in *Rethinking Los Angeles* (United States of America: Sage Publications, Inc., 1996), 171–89.

<sup>53</sup> CONNIE KOENENN, "South-Central Stops an Incinerator," *Los Angeles Times*, December 23, 1991, [http://articles.latimes.com/1991-12-23/news/vw-830\\_1\\_incineration-plant](http://articles.latimes.com/1991-12-23/news/vw-830_1_incineration-plant).

<sup>54</sup> KOENENN.

<sup>55</sup> KOENENN.

project educated themselves on every aspect of the project. They challenged the project by centering the voices and leadership of members of the community that were traditionally excluded from the policy and decision making process.

The activist leadership of the campaign against the incinerator was primarily working-class African American women, who garnered the support of mainly white environmental groups yet maintained their visibility in the organizing project to create a coalition that would continue doing work after the LANCER project's dismissal. The CCOSLCLA would become the symbol of the environmental justice movement in Los Angeles, basing their organizing principles on a commitment to community well being and environmentalism that aims to protect the health of communities of color. By the year 1996 the organization had eight affordable housing projects and two economic development ventures in hopes of furthering environmental justice in an urban environment.<sup>56</sup> The lessons learned in the mobilization against the LANCER project started a trend of multi-ethnic coalition building in the greater L.A. area. The success of the environmental justice organizing against LANCER inspired other community-based activism in the region and gave way to the creation of a multi-ethnic activist network. The CCOSLCLA passed on experiences and knowledge from the LANCER experience to the Mexicana Mothers of East Los Angeles (MELA) during their movement against a site for the burning of hazardous waste in the city of Vernon.<sup>57</sup> The relationship between CCOSLCLA and MELA is another early example of multiracial interaction within political activism towards a justice-based development of the landscape.

---

<sup>56</sup> Michael J. Dear, H. Eric Shockman, and Greg Hise, "Multiracial Organizing Among Environmental Justice Activists in Los Angeles."

<sup>57</sup> Michael J. Dear, H. Eric Shockman, and Greg Hise.

The partnership between the two coalitions was “perhaps the most notable success story, such a coalition, forged by the Concerned Citizens of South-Central Los Angeles, succeeded in scrapping plans to build a huge garbage incinerator...Today African Americans from CCOSCLA are joining forces with the Hispanic members of MELA, who in turn are forming a coalition with Chinese residents of nearby Lincoln Heights.”<sup>58</sup> These coalitions were predominantly composed of people of color, but there were other organizations like Greenpeace and citizens for a Better Environment that supported the people of color environmental justice organizing with their privilege and their position in the environmental justice movement.<sup>59</sup> Although white environmentalists were present at the beginnings of multiracial coalition building, the people of color environmental grassroots movement occupied a distinctive position in relation to mainstream environmentalism. “The minority movement is anti-bourgeois and anti-racist. It capitalizes on the social and cultural differences of people of color as it cautiously builds alliances with whites and persons of the middle class.”<sup>60</sup> Multi-ethnic coalition building is crucial to strengthening the environmental justice movement locally and nationally.

The formation of a pan-racial identity at the 1991 summit and the organizing successes of the LANCER project in the 1980s paved the way for Los Angeles to have the strongest multiracial organizing setting in the nation that continues to address issues of environmental injustice. Globalization only increases its influence in the shaping of Los Angeles by creating ever-changing identities of people of color that cannot be easily defined or homogenously addressed. The environmental justice movement broadens the scope of environmentalism to

---

<sup>58</sup> Michael J. Dear, H. Eric Shockman, and Greg Hise.

<sup>59</sup> Michael J. Dear, H. Eric Shockman, and Greg Hise.

<sup>60</sup> Michael H. Schill and Regina Austin, “Black, Brown, Poor & Poisoned: Minority Grassroots Environmentalism and the Quest for Eco-Justice,” *Kansas Journal of Law and Public Policy*, 1991.

better function as a facet of the greater spatial movement. With this context, coalition building is more easily facilitated—organizing strategies and different racial experiences are shared and explored in the environmental justice movement today. The crossroad for collaboration offers a mutual opportunity for the betterment of each justice-seeking social movement involved. The LANCER project was a monumental win for multiracial environmental justice organizing in Los Angeles—the multi-racial and multi-sector organizing that took place in the 1980s would set the stage for future social justice organizing in the city.

### *The legacy of 1992 in Los Angeles*

After the success of the LANCER project, the 1990s would pose its own set of challenges in the social justice movement. As Hector Tobar, a reporter at the Los Angeles Times during the L.A. riots, explained, “decades of racial crisis as the status quo went out the window...tension had to break.”<sup>61</sup> The injustice that had been accumulating over generations manifested in on of the most violent moments of civil unrest in Los Angeles’ history. In the context of social justice movements in Los Angeles, the uprisings served as a turning point in looking at space, race and class in the city. For community organizers at the time, the violence that broke out “following the acquittal of four White police officers charged in the videotaped beating of African American motorist Rodney King” made clear the economic and social distresses plaguing the region.<sup>62</sup> The sheer scale of the uprisings and the neighborhoods affected highlighted the diversity of communities that were feeling this frustration against the status quo. If people were desperate and angry enough to burn down their own city, it was a sign that progressive movements at the

---

<sup>61</sup> Grace Lee, *K-TOWN’92* (Center for Asian American Media, 2017), ktown92.com.

<sup>62</sup> Mara A. Marks, Matt A. Barreto, and Nathan D. Woods, “Race and Racial Attitudes a Decade after the 1992 Los Angeles Riots,” *Urban Affairs Review* 40, no. 1 (September 1, 2004): 3–18, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1078087404264674>.

time were not getting at the root of the problem. This is not to blame previous social justice organizing for the uprising—there were important efforts to address inequality and build coalitions in Los Angeles before 1992. However, the uprising indicated clearly that the approach to social justice organizing had to change. Immediately following the uprisings of 1992, communities of color felt a backlash from white residents and local and national policy makers. They expressed heightened fear and distrust of communities of color that manifested in a spike of anti-immigrant and anti-affirmative action ballot initiatives and increased white-flight from the urban center.

The 1992 riots in many ways entrenched the culture of prejudices of local and distant witnesses, emphasizing intergroup tensions without considering the city's racialized landscape on a whole. The manner in which the riots were reported generally highlighted the dominant narrative, which did not include the complexity of Los Angeles' multi-ethnic history and perspectives. It is important to consider who is able to tell the story of the 1992 riots and what perspectives are represented in the narratives surrounding historic events and how these representations impact the formation of identity. The uprising of 1992, which many now call the Justice Riots of 1992 due to its implications on the awakening of spatial-justice consciousness in the city, were much more than an expression of frustration in the African American community over police brutality and continuing racial injustice.<sup>63</sup> Many perceived the Justice Riots as a repeat of the Watts Riots of 1965. However, what took place in 1992 was actually quite different than the uprisings of the previous decades because "it was much more multicultural in its

---

<sup>63</sup> Edward W. Soja, *Seeking Spatial Justice*.

participants, more embedded in the New Economy that had emerged in the preceding twenty years, and more global in terms of both its causes and its potential effects.”<sup>64</sup>

The Justice Riots called attention to the incapability of local and national government to address significant social and economic problems facing Los Angeles. “Traditional urban and party politics seemed more hopeless than ever before, leading many former activists to abandon their political commitments.”<sup>65</sup> For historically marginalized community, this sense of hopelessness was channeled into intense mobilization and justice organizing from below. The 1992 uprising made way for communities in Los Angeles to take action—to set a vision, develop new strategies, forge alliances, and build power from the bottom up. To many communities in Los Angeles, the Rodney King trial pointed out the government’s inability to deliver justice in not only in the case itself, but also in issues concerning the health and safety of their communities. In response to the system’s lack of accountability, the multi-ethnic and immigrant working class took it upon themselves’ to mobilize and craft a new political era. The lack of governmental response to the Justice Riots of 1992 inspired a realization in marginalized populations to take on innovative new forms of grassroots organizing that required the collaboration and coalition building. These grassroots movements acknowledged differences based on class, ethnicity, gender, and geographical location, but found solidarity in the common struggle for justice.

Following 1992, community members and activists hit the ground running. The first wave of movement building after the uprising laid the groundwork for a future of vibrant social justice organizing. Organizations like AGENDA, the Labor/Community Strategy Center, Strategic Actions for Just Alliance, and South L.A.’s Community Coalition were rebuilding the

---

<sup>64</sup> Edward W. Soja.

<sup>65</sup> Edward W. Soja.

city to center the social issues that had been made apparent during the civil unrest. On a more general level, the immigrant rights movement became visible after the 1992 uprisings. The immigrant community became increasingly political, avidly advocating for undocumented immigrant rights and immigrant resource accessibility through organizations like the Coalition for Human Immigrant Rights of Los Angeles. “Small though they may have seen, these emerging organizations nonetheless had a big vision of wide-scale social change, based on an understanding that they needed to reach beyond traditional boundaries and think about larger regional targets.”<sup>66</sup> Despite the devastating effects of the 1992 uprising, Los Angeles’ social justice movement was in motion. Communities of color and the social justice organizations had their work cut out for them—the issues facing Los Angeles were global in scale, but consequences of these macro-level social dynamics were being felt in the everyday experiences of communities of color. The challenges of injustice and former structures of power were too formidable for one group to confront on its own. “Rather than viewing each other as competitors, there was a quiet realization that L.A. needed all hands on deck, that a movement would be bigger than its members, and that goal was to build an ecosystem not an empire.”<sup>67</sup> The focus on a horizontal approach to justice organizing transpired after the 1992, emphasizing collaboration and collective action to dismantle the racialized system. It is imperative to understand the story and the context of 1992 when further engaging with specific social justice movements like the environmental justice movement.

---

<sup>66</sup> Manuel Pastor and Michele Prichard, “L.A. Rising: The 1992 Civil Unrest, the Arc of Social Justice Organizing, and the Lessons for Today’s Movement Building” (USC Program for Environmental and Regional Equity, April 2012), <https://www.scribd.com/document/228188770/L-A-Rising>.

<sup>67</sup> Manuel Pastor and Michele Prichard.



The visions of the post-1992 social justice movement catalyzed the development of multi-dimensional environmental justice organizing. Community-based organizations like Communities for a Better Environment and GREENLA would create a regional voice for the environmental justice movement by working on campaigns to address issues such as air pollution and power plant siting.<sup>68</sup> Post-1992 environmental justice organizing saw not only an intensified focus on environmental justice, but also these mobilizations against environmental issues frequently partnered with labor-rights organizations for the first time. This collaboration between labor-community organizing and the environmental justice was a direct result of the post-1992 spatial consciousness. The Los Angeles labor movement moved away from bureaucracy, and increasingly became involved with the immigrant rights movements and then transformed to become integral to the formation of broader community alliances.<sup>69</sup> The labor movement and environmental movement in Los Angeles overcame the jobs versus environment debate that had historically prevented coalition building. After 1992, these two social justice movements collectively organized for issues such as cleaning ports, organizing bus riders, and reforming the city's waste industry.<sup>70</sup> By addressing the in-group tensions that were heightened by the 1992 riots, the environmental justice movement in Los Angeles has become an integral part of the movement towards a spatial justice framework.

### *Los Angeles and its spatial turn*

The resurgence of the labor movement and the social justice organizing model post-1992 led to the rise of local and neighborhood consciousness and the focus of place-based politics. “A

---

<sup>68</sup> Manuel Pastor and Michele Prichard.

<sup>69</sup> Manuel Pastor and Michele Prichard.

<sup>70</sup> Manuel Pastor and Michele Prichard.

strategic community-based regionalism has entered the activists' agenda and has facilitated coalition building and the formation of what might be described as regional confederations or networks bringing together diverse organizations that in the past would rarely work together."<sup>71</sup> To understand the increasing spatiality of social justice movements, an ideological and philosophical framework for community-based activism emerged—spatial justice. Inspired by Lefebvre's notion of the right to the city, spatial justice is a concept that refers "to an intentional and focused emphasis on the spatial or geographical aspects of justice and injustice."<sup>72</sup> Spatial justice is concerned over "the fair and equitable distribution in space of socially valued resources and opportunities to use them." Spatial justice is a framework, a tool some say, to bring spatial awareness to political discourse and social struggle. "Spatial justice is not meant to be a substitute for or alternative to the search for social, economic, or environmental justice."<sup>73</sup> It is a framework that is meant to broaden and extend social justice concepts into new areas of understanding and political practice. Spatial justice "seeks to promote more progressive and participatory forms of democratic politics and social activism, and to provide new ideas about how to mobilize and maintain cohesive coalitions and regional confederations of grassroots and justice-oriented social movements."<sup>74</sup>

Spatial justice scholar Edward Soja makes the argument that a critical spatial imagination entered Los Angeles' political practice earlier and more profoundly than any other American city."<sup>75</sup> This is largely due to the development of "new labor-community coalitions, often assisted by university-based activism and research, began to emerge and to take the lead in

---

<sup>71</sup> Edward W. Soja, *Seeking Spatial Justice*.

<sup>72</sup> Edward W. Soja.

<sup>73</sup> Edward W. Soja.

<sup>74</sup> Edward W. Soja.

<sup>75</sup> Edward W. Soja.

promoting a regionally based justice movement of unusual strength and persistence.”<sup>76</sup> The coalition building discussed in the previous section utilized a critically spatial perspective to begin building a community-based social justice movement. The spatial justice framework supports the notion that society’s “spatiality, sociality, and historicity are mutually constitutive, no one inherently privileged a priori.”<sup>77</sup> Similarly to the unitary people of color identity in environmental justice, the spatial justice framework seeks to promote collective and multidimensional action. This heightened spatial justice awareness culminates to create a “spatial turn,” which is an “unprecedented diffusion of critical spatial thinking across an unusually broad spectrum of subject areas.”<sup>78</sup> Through a spatial justice framework, the spatial temporal nature of human beings is highlighted through a geo-historical lens to explain key issues such as poverty, racism, and environmental degradation.<sup>79</sup> Spatial justice encourages distinct social justice movements to see how they are related to one another in a racialized landscape, and in turn catalyzes collective action.

The geographies of injustice, where injustice manifests itself in the landscape and whom it decides to exclude, create legacies of uneven structures that unequally distribute advantage and disadvantage.<sup>80</sup> The effects of these socio-spatial geographies are changed through forms of social and political action that collectively seek to either decrease injustice or increase justice. This process for seeking justice has become a powerful tool to create solidarity across disciplines. The search for justice has increased the understanding of spatiality in environmental racism, and in turn has informed the position of environmental justice in the broader justice-

---

<sup>76</sup> Edward W. Soja.

<sup>77</sup> Edward W. Soja.

<sup>78</sup> Edward W. Soja.

<sup>79</sup> Edward W. Soja.

<sup>80</sup> Edward W. Soja.

seeking movements. Through the search for justice, a new strategy for building coalitions based on political mobilization for the betterment of society has taken the place of previous rigid definitions and binaries of social activism. The convergence of justice-based coalitions has opened up channels of support from unexpected sources of resistance on the premise of shared experiences within the people of color identity. The new focus on multi-scalar activism—the intersection of worker, community, and neighborhood-based activism—is connecting locally based activist strategies with global scale issues and movements. Multi-scalar activism in the past thirty years has contextualized injustice and justice in spatial terms, making it easier for coalition building across disciplines. The spatial turn in Los Angeles has created an environmental justice movement that is multi-scalar, multi-dimensional, and community driven. The spatial justice framework centers the role of identity in the development of racialized landscapes. This emphasis on positionality connects L.A.’s environmental justice movement to the socio-historical relationships that are imperative to community-based organizing that is committed to transformational solidarity.

#### *Overview of chapter 1: spatial justice advancing environmental justice*

The history of Los Angeles’ social justice organizing of the late 20<sup>th</sup> century, and the social dynamics leading up to the present framework of activism, is a long and complicated tale. The story of Los Angeles leading up to and after the 1992 uprisings involves so many stakeholders and turning points in the struggle for justice. This chapter has attempted to puzzle together the key lessons and components of L.A.’s social justice organizing to contextualize the environmental justice organizing examples discussed in the second chapter. The people of color identity in the national environmental justice movement contributed to the capacity of Los

Angeles' growing environmental justice consciousness. Regionally, the environmental justice movement overcame challenges of fragmentation and coalition building by employing a spatial justice framework to its organizing strategy. The potential for social change within L.A.'s environmental justice movement increased significantly with the merging of multiple concerns—the recommitment to base building in grassroots organizing after the 1992 uprising expanded the range of environmental An understanding of L.A.'s changing social landscape, before and after 1992, and the multi-interest organizing strategies that emerged are important contextual considerations when looking at the environmental justice movement's current framework. The next chapter will provide current examples that are direct outcomes of the movement building and restructuring of the 1980s and 90s.

## Chapter 2

### Examples of Environmental Justice and Spatial Justice in Practice

#### *Practical syncretism: stretch, resonance, and resistance*

The first chapter highlighted the importance of the relationship between the environmental justice and spatial justice frameworks. Activism and scholarship that are practicing or discussing the connections between spatial justice theory, the immigrant rights movement, and the environmental justice movement “have the previous opportunity to think in cross-cutting ways and to find both promising continuities and productive breaks in the mix of people, histories, political and economic forces, and landscapes that make up forgotten places.” Making these connections raised a number of theoretical questions and challenges when trying to conceptualize and analyze the many issues and organizations that make up Los Angeles’ social justice landscape. How does scholarship and activism work through these challenges and inconsistencies when imagining social justice-organizing strategies? Ruth Gilmore offers the term *syncretism* to address social justice building dilemmas and provide a framework to craft “the kinds of motivated methodologies that enable the continuum of scholarly research as political experimentation.” The syncretic approach to research and activism “is charged at the outset by a particular kind of questioning.” Practical syncretism goes beyond an either/or boundary in research and activism, and instead “compels us to think about problems, and the theories and questions adequate to them, in terms of what [Gilmore has] called their stretch, resonance, and resilience.”<sup>81</sup>

In syncretism, stretch “enables a question to reach further than the immediate object without bypassing its particularity.” Stretch encourages activist scholarship to pose questions that

---

<sup>81</sup> Ruth Wilson Gilmore, “Forgotten Places and the Seeds of Grassroots Planning.”

aim to dismantle power structures in a racialized landscape. Resonance “enables a question to support and model nonhierarchical collective action by producing a hum that, by inviting strong attention, elicits response that do not necessarily adhere to already existing architectures of sense making.” The social justice movement transformation post-1992 is an example of resonance—environmental and spatial justice frameworks inspired a social justice movement that worked outside of the traditional union model. Resilience, the third phase of practical syncretism, “enables a question to be flexible rather than brittle, such that changing circumstances and surprising discoveries keep a project connected with its purpose rather than defeated by the unexpected.” Resilience is key to long-term environmental justice movements. Outcomes of social justice movements have inaccurately tied to a win-lose duality and weakened the possibilities for sustained collaboration. Syncretic resilience ties in stretch and resonance in that it keeps movements tied to their original goals for justice and transformation, and takes unforeseen failures and successes as part of the movement building strategy. Applying practical syncretism to the analysis of the relationship between environmental justice and spatial justice is imperative to creating an environmental justice movement that is stronger due to its increased multidimensionality and adaptability. The environmental organizing strategies of KIWA and air sensor project are examples of syncretic stretch, resonance, and resilience in practice.

#### *Multi-ethnic coalition building and spatial justice: Koreatown Immigrant Workers Alliance*

The Koreatown Immigrant Workers Alliance (KIWA), located in the heart of Los Angeles, is one of the most well established work centers in the nation. KIWA’s “mission is to empower Koreatown’s low-wage immigrant workers for dignity and respect in the workplace and community, and to work together with other communities to realize a vision of a just Los

Angeles.”<sup>82</sup> Created in 1992, KIWA was created two months before the Justice Riots took place. As stated on the organization’s website, “KIWA started with the goal of addressing worker exploitation amongst Korean and Latino workers in Koreatown, and to struggle in solidarity with other communities for a more just Los Angeles.”<sup>83</sup> KIWA was founded by local, Koreatown activists according to a video of an interview with one of the organization’s community organizers, which demonstrates the KIWA’s community-based activism from its conception. The mission of KIWA is “to bring together workers, community members, and students in a broad, multi-ethnic coalition,” focusing “on workers’ rights, equitable development, and immigrants’ justice.”<sup>84</sup> KIWA is committed to bridging between social justice movements and organizing around economic, social, and environmental justice. The organizations activism “combines cross-racial grassroots organizing, leadership development, direct services, advocacy, cultural resistance programs, community-based research and multi-ethnic coalition building.”<sup>85</sup>

The organization is a self-described hub for multi-ethnic and intersectional social and economic justice organizing in the Los Angeles area. KIWA has taken the social difference perspective to heart and has created a network of solidarity in the Los Angeles people of color communities in many fields of social justice activism. “Through persistent relationship-building among Korean, Mexican, and Central American workers and their families, KIWA has been able to bring together seemingly disparate groups in spaces throughout Los Angeles.”<sup>86</sup> Koreatown is a multiracial, multiclass community constantly in motion—an “ethnic nexus” due to its largely

---

<sup>82</sup> “About KIWA,” KIWA Workers for Justice, 2017, <http://kiwa.org/about/>.

<sup>83</sup> “History,” KIWA Workers for Justice, 2017, <http://kiwa.org/history/>.

<sup>84</sup> “About KIWA.”

<sup>85</sup> “About KIWA.”

<sup>86</sup> Brady Collins, “THE WORKERS UNITED! MULTI-ETHNIC SOLIDARITY IN L.A.’S KOREATOWN,” *Hyphen Magazine*, January 28, 2015, <https://hyphenmagazine.com/blog/2015/01/workers-united-multi-ethnic-solidarity-las-koreatown>.



immigrant community.<sup>87</sup> Koreans are the single largest national origin group within the Koreatown. Koreans composed 22 percent of the population, but were and still are a racial/ethnic minority in the neighborhood.<sup>88</sup> Latinos, with origins from Mexico, El Salvador, Guatemala, and other Latin American nations, made up 58 percent of the population in 2012.<sup>89</sup> Non-Hispanic whites, African Americans, non-Korean Asian and Pacific Islanders and other multiracial, Native American, or non-Latinos, made-up the remaining 20 percent.<sup>90</sup> KIWA demonstrates that people recognize the mutual experiences within the people of color identity and can form community through activism, art, and a desire for justice in the landscape despite cultural and linguistic barriers. KIWA works within a historic framework—understanding the experiences of the community of color in Los Angeles, the organization works to give voices to the historically silenced who then can find solidarity in this new collective sense of empowerment. KIWA was part of the original network of organizations committed to the emergence of L.A.’s post-1992 social justice organizing model discussed in chapter one.

KIWA’s work is especially shaped around the uprisings of 1992, where the mainstream media’s focus on racial tensions in Koreatown, predominantly between African Americans and Korean Americans, inaccurately considered the broader social implications of unrest.<sup>91</sup> “Images of armed Korean shop owners guarding their stores from the rooftops circulated and recirculated, as did portrayals of anger in the African-American community over the light sentencing of a

---

<sup>87</sup> Jared Sanchez et al., “Koreatown: A Contested Community at a Crossroads,” April 2012, [http://kiwa.flowcrow.com/wp-content/uploads/2011/05/Koreatown\\_Contested\\_Community\\_Crossroads\\_web.pdf](http://kiwa.flowcrow.com/wp-content/uploads/2011/05/Koreatown_Contested_Community_Crossroads_web.pdf).

<sup>88</sup> Jared Sanchez et al.

<sup>89</sup> Jared Sanchez et al.

<sup>90</sup> Jared Sanchez et al.

<sup>91</sup> Grace Lee, *K-TOWN*’92.

Korean-American shop owner who shot black teenager Latasha Harlins.”<sup>92</sup> Whereas the Latino community’s narratives were under-reported and under-discussed when considering the social factors that led to the social unrest in 1992.<sup>93</sup> The years of frustration over persisting poverty and lack of government advocacy due to the regions decades of economic restructuring, government deregulation, and labor market discrimination would be the unspoken frustrations of the Koreatown neighborhood. Despite the social uncertainty after the civil unrest, KIWA kept their mission in focus and continued to organize around the foundations that caused the Justice Riots (another example of syncretic resilience discussed at the beginning of chapter two).<sup>94</sup> In response to 1992, KIWA and many other multi-ethnic labor organizations created one of the most active and dynamic multi-racial movements for social and economic justice in the U.S. This network of social justice organizations have implemented creative policy initiatives and won important battles to bring justice to Koreatown’s racialized landscape and everyday residents. KIWA works closely with other multi-ethnic organizations and its community members to empower each other to have a voice in the democratic process to advocate for the future of their community.

Today Koreatown is experiencing a wave of economic restructuring and reinvestment that is both increasing the economic vitality of the neighborhood, but is also pushing out a lot of long-term residents of the neighborhood due to wage theft and inaccessible housing.<sup>95</sup> Labor market changes in the region lead to Koreatown having one of the highest rates of poverty in the region—nearly 46 percent—and many residents struggle to get by as a new influx of residents are shaping Koreatown in their own vision without considering the economic effects on the

---

<sup>92</sup> Jared Sanchez et al., “Koreatown: A Contested Community at a Crossroads.”

<sup>93</sup> Grace Lee, *K-TOWN*’92.

<sup>94</sup> Jared Sanchez et al., “Koreatown: A Contested Community at a Crossroads.”

<sup>95</sup> Jared Sanchez et al.

community at large.<sup>96</sup> KIWA has been successful in creating organizing campaigns working towards achieving justice in a polarized landscape. These organizing efforts are community-based and coalition based—drawing upon a diversity of experiences and different sources of intergenerational knowledge. KIWA’s campaigns have empowered hundreds of community members to be at the forefront of creating change in their community. KIWA’s approach to social justice activism places stakeholders—those most affected by the conditions—at the center of leadership. KIWA creates a space for people of color to collectively dictate and advocate for the future of their community.

The majority of KIWA’s community initiatives focus on labor justice activism and, especially with the current political climate, immigration rights. Within these social justice concerns, KIWA has also focused on environmental health issues, including air pollution, community-based research, and the community’s accessibility to green spaces. Koreatown has been described as a “park starved” neighborhood.<sup>97</sup> “The elderly have almost no open or green space to sit and rest during the day, and some children have gone their entire lives without neighborhood spaces in which to run and play.”<sup>98</sup> KIWA has participated in Los Angeles’ sociospatial turn by organizing to create more accessible urban green space and transforming the physical landscape in their social justice organizing framework. There are close to 50,000 people per square mile in Koreatown, and there is little green or open space to serve the community in comparison to the neighborhood’s density.<sup>99</sup> This disparity in green spaces is yet another manifestation of environmental injustice in Los Angeles—systematically, low-income

---

<sup>96</sup> Jared Sanchez et al.

<sup>97</sup> Victoria Kim, “How a Plan to Create a Much-Needed Park in Koreatown Withered - LA Times,” *LA Times*, April 15, 2016, sec. Local/California, <http://www.latimes.com/local/california/la-me-koreatown-park-20160415-story.html>.

<sup>98</sup> Jared Sanchez et al., “Koreatown: A Contested Community at a Crossroads.”

<sup>99</sup> “Ktown Farms,” KIWA Workers for Justice, 2017, <http://kiwa.flowcrow.com/ktown-farms/>.

communities of color do not have the political capital to advocate for the green spaces that are incredibly needed in urban spaces for community health.<sup>100</sup> To address this disproportionate exposure to environmental pollution and racism, KIWA has been engaged in various green space projects and environmental justice activism.

In 2011 KIWA supported the former Community Redevelopment Agency of Los Angeles (CRA) plan to purchase the southern portion of a lot on the corner of 7<sup>th</sup> Street and Hobart Boulevard.<sup>101</sup> A transnational developer formerly purchased the property during the mid-2000s for building condominium tower, but the plans for real estate fell through and the lot has remained empty. The CRA had plans to develop a community-designed Koreatown Central Park to address the need for the expansion of urban green spaces. KIWA helped coordinate outreach efforts and galvanize support from a diverse group of stakeholders in the park. Although the statewide dissolution of the CRA in 2012 has stalled the project, KIWA is still exploring alternatives for the community park with the City of Los Angeles while working on a broader campaign for green space in Koreatown.<sup>102</sup> The original plot of land for the Koreatown Central Park has unfortunately been developed as a site for luxury apartments set to be completed in early 2018.<sup>103</sup> Although the original site is no longer available, organizing for a future park and increased green space is still alive and well in Koreatown. Although the CRA's plan for a Koreatown park did not come to fruition, KIWA forged yet another alliance and deepened the multi-ethnic and multi-interest tradition of environmental organizing in Los Angeles. By rallying

---

<sup>100</sup> Jennifer Wolch, John P. Wilson, and Jed Fehrenbach, "Parks and Park Funding in Los Angeles: An Equity-Mapping Analysis," *Urban Geography* 26, no. 1 (2005): 4–35.

<sup>101</sup> "A Tale of Two Parks," Liberty Hill Foundation, August 8, 2011, <https://www.libertyhill.org/2011/08/08/tale-of-two-parks>.

<sup>102</sup> Jared Sanchez et al., "Koreatown: A Contested Community at a Crossroads."

<sup>103</sup> Victoria Kim, "How a Plan to Create a Much-Needed Park in Koreatown Withered - LA Times."

around green space, KIWA was able to bring together unlikely or untraditional partners to create dialogue and mobilizations for environmental justice.

Since Koreatown Central Park was no longer in the immediate plan, KIWA pursued the creation of micro-sites of community gardens all over the neighborhood to address the needs for green space. These community gardens could be separated, but were still unified as part of KIWA's green corridor.<sup>104</sup> Although the project is currently inactive, the organization hopes to program will be return and be running in the near future. During the project's active period, KIWA established thirteen urban gardens in the Koreatown area. The project's goals were to bring together "KIWA's members and broader community residents to design and create small sites for food production and recreation."<sup>105</sup> The food grown on the residential sites would be shared with community members at and beyond the site—the processes at the gardens are meant to be collective and community-based. Increasing "public access to green space...improves the health, sustainability, and community networks in Koreatown."<sup>106</sup> " By creating a green corridor, KIWA mobilized to promote food sovereignty, claim space on their own terms, and create social ties across identities in the neighborhood. The Asian Pacific Community Fund and the Chinatown Firecracker 5K/10K Run Walk were two organizations that partnered with KIWA to make this project possible.<sup>107</sup>

The Ktown Farms urban garden initiative contributed to the region's greater environmental and spatial justice movement despite the duration of the project. Also it is important to note that although the scale of the Ktown Farms project is small in comparison to some of the larger campaigns at the worker center, the gardens are an important legacy of Los

---

<sup>104</sup> "About KIWA."

<sup>105</sup> "Ktown Farms."

<sup>106</sup> "Ktown Farms."

<sup>107</sup> "Ktown Farms."

Angeles' social justice organizing model after 1992. The community building and community-based activities that happened in the gardens were part of KIWA's coalition building strategies to connect residents of Koreatown with each other and find common ground in taking agency in the environment and their communities. Cross-cultural and linguistic collaboration in the Ktown Farms is part of the sociospatial organizing strategy that is making KIWA such an important organization in the justice-seeking movement in the context of a post-1992 Koreatown. Community members participating in the urban garden project demonstrated a commitment to "residential rights to inhabit the city and shape the production of urban and regional geographies" in a city that has historically stripped those opportunities away.<sup>108</sup> The Ktown Farms project is part of a growing network of urban gardening initiatives in Los Angeles. By creating green spaces in the urban setting, community members are participating in community-based projects that resist the racial hegemony while renewing the city in a wake of gentrification that empowers and builds a sustainable future with the community's well being at the center of development.

*Interdisciplinary coalition building: "Science, Technology, Asian American" and Promoting Youth Advocacy*

Institutions of higher education have been important allies in various environmental justice organizing projects in the Los Angeles area. Students and faculty at these institutions contribute their relative privilege to support justice-seeking movements—the LANCER project and the relationship between the CCOSCLA and the Urban Studies department at UCLA is a prime example of this interdisciplinary coalition building in Los Angeles' environmental justice

---

<sup>108</sup> Edward W. Soja, *Seeking Spatial Justice*.

movement. Professor Todd Honma continues this legacy of multi-ethnic, multivalent coalition building in his community engagement course titled “Science, Technology, Asian America” at Pitzer College, a small liberal arts colleges 30 miles east of downtown Los Angeles that is part of the Claremont College Consortium.<sup>109</sup> The geographic information system application CalEnviroScreen demonstrates that Claremont is an island of low-level air pollution in comparison to the surrounding areas in Los Angeles and San Bernardino Counties, which both have areas of high level air pollution. The course would examine the power dynamics that would result in the contrast in environmental burden distribution of the region. The course also

examines the social construction of science, the ethics and politics of scientific and technological innovation, and the epistemological assumptions that underpin the foundations of modern Western Science. In particular, the course contextualizes science and technology within larger sociopolitical systems...A central component of this course is a community engagement project that partners with off-campus organizations.<sup>110</sup>

In 2014 the Asian American Studies class partnered the API Forward Movement and the student organization Promoting Youth Advocacy (PYA) at Mark Keppel High School in the San Gabriel Valley, just 8 miles east of downtown Los Angeles. The project at the time focused on community advocacy around environmental issues, and in this case the organizations were addressing air pollution on campus. The Mark Keppel High School campus is located less than 100 feet from the Interstate-10 freeway and its student body is composed of 73% Asian and 22% Latino students.<sup>111</sup> Many of these students are first-generation high school attendants or English learners, with Mandarin-, Cantonese-, Spanish-, and Vietnamese-language backgrounds. The work of PYA and the API Forward Movement emphasizes the recurrent narrative that

---

<sup>109</sup> Todd Honma, “Advancing Alternative Pathways to Science: Community Partnership, Do-It-Yourself (DIY)/Do-It-Together (DIT) Collaboration, and STEM Learning ‘from Below,’” *Transformations: The Journal of Inclusive Scholarship and Pedagogy* 27, no. 1 (2017): 41–50.

<sup>110</sup> Todd Honma.

<sup>111</sup> Todd Honma.

environmental health risks often fall on communities of color with less financial and political capital. The social justice organizing at Mark Keppel High ties back to Los Angeles' history of immigrant rights activism that emerged out of the labor justice movement in the 1980s. The partnership also fits into the growing national environmental racism research that demonstrates the long term effects on student health when they experience prolonged exposure to air pollutants—which are increased risk of asthma and reduced lung function.<sup>112</sup>

API Forward Movement and PYA have been working on creating opportunities for the Mark Keppel High School students to investigate poor air quality and the chronic diseases that stem from this kind of environmental injustice. This emphasizes a participatory action research (PAR) model that places those who are directly impacted by the issues at the center of the investigatory process and in the position to determine the research methods. Student involvement in the research is crucial in combating environmental racism, and facilitates the kind of collaboration that is found across other environmental justice projects. Through their work, student researchers discovered the need for air sensors that were accessible and low-cost to continue with the PAR process. “Enabling the students to construct the very machine that would help them document the conditions of their oppression and marginalization” would be fundamental in reclaiming their agency in an unjust landscape.<sup>113</sup> Here is where Claremont College students in Honma’s class came in—by following a “do-it-together” framework of makerspace projects, the college students would help construct these do-it-yourself air sensors

---

<sup>112</sup> Juliana Maantay, “Asthma and Air Pollution in the Bronx: Methodological and Data Considerations in Using GIS for Environmental Justice and Health Research,” *Health & Place*, 13, no. 1 (March 2007): 32–56.

<sup>113</sup> Todd Honma, “Advancing Alternative Pathways to Science: Community Partnership, Do-It-Yourself (DIY)/Do-It-Together (DIT) Collaboration, and STEM Learning ‘from Below.’”



and contribute to a horizontally structured learning environment.<sup>114</sup> Both high school and college students would be able to embrace new forms of knowledge and collaboration in the generally vertical field of STEM. PYA and students at Mark Keppel High would use technology that had formerly contributed to the industrialization of a racialized landscape to reverse combat environmental racism.<sup>115</sup>

The students in the course set specific goals for the outcome of the class: “skill sharing, meeting people and creating a community of learning, and documenting their work for others to learn from.”<sup>116</sup> Setting these ethos-based goals were important in steering clear of a tourist-like experience of community engagement, and instead working with the high school students and PYA in solidarity. This framework of collaboration and cooperation is essential in the coalition building process. The project emphasized a “sciences from below” approach to the study and practice of science, which simultaneously redirects STEM education’s sphere of inclusion and raises the question of science’s role in social justice movements.<sup>117</sup> Community-based projects like these “allow students to embrace new forms of knowledge and collaboration and help promote democratic learning.”<sup>118</sup> The project challenged dominant understandings of knowledge and the legitimacy of said knowledge. College students had to especially identify “the recognition of the ways in which the life experiences of an individual within a family or community yield knowledge that is useful, powerful, and transferable.”<sup>119</sup> Building the air sensor

---

<sup>114</sup> Todd Honma.

<sup>115</sup> Gwen Ottinger and Benjamin R. Cohen, *Technoscience and Environmental Justice : Expert Cultures in a Grassroots Movement* (Cambridge, UNITED STATES: MIT Press, 2014), <http://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/claremont/detail.action?docID=3339290>.

<sup>116</sup> Todd Honma, “Advancing Alternative Pathways to Science: Community Partnership, Do-It-Yourself (DIY)/Do-It-Together (DIT) Collaboration, and STEM Learning ‘from Below.’”

<sup>117</sup> Todd Honma.

<sup>118</sup> Todd Honma.

<sup>119</sup> Todd Honma.

took the entirety of the semester and required major commitment in and outside of structured class time. Learning how to use 3D printers, how to smolder wires, and how to bridge theoretical and conceptual topics of the course provided a space for mutual growth and education. Despite incredible dedication and passion from the students, they were not able to finish the air sensor by the end of the semester. However, the project had long term successes in not only the lives of both high school and college students involved, but contributed to the greater environmental justice movement of the greater Los Angeles area. The unfinished air sensor, as professor Honma describes, is “a metaphor for the unfinished project of social justice” and the understated complexity of community work.<sup>120</sup> The pilot semester marked the beginning of a longterm partnership between the API Forward Movement and the Asian American Studies department at the Claremont Colleges. In environmental organizing, it is a significant challenge to sustain contact between coalitions after a particular mobilization and to continue building relationships beyond moments of collaboration. The Asian American studies course manages to overcome this major obstacle in coalition building and has had semesters of students, old and new, returning to continue building a spatial and environmental movement. The first group of students laid the groundwork for future semesters to continue collaborating on the air sensor project, and to expand the first project beyond its original conceptions.

The DIY/DIT air sensor project validates experiences from historically marginalized sources is deconstructing the racial hierarchy that has led to the inaccessibility of the STEM field and the disproportionate levels of pollution in communities of color and low-income areas. Both of these greater social ills—educational inequality and environmental racism—are being addressed and challenged with community-based research. Transformative politics stress the

---

<sup>120</sup> Todd Honma.

dismantling of unjust power dynamics through bottom-up activism. The makerspace class enables formerly victims of environmental injustice to transform into organized, politically engaged communities that create sustained social movements with self-advocacy and agency. Ironically, technology is responsible for the major industrialization of Los Angeles that led to such a racialized landscape, but the air sensor project reverses this narrative and transforms technology to be a platform for multivalent political organizing and social change. This community engagement class has taken an existing environmental injustice and has created a heterogeneous solution to a complicated issue. Many groups converged to create a multi-ethnic and interdisciplinary coalition aimed to addressing environmental injustice and restore justice to the high school students of a marginalized community. Although the college course was not specifically designed to address environmental racism, it directly tied the field of Asian American studies to the environmental justice movement—especially increasing the interdisciplinary nature of the latter.

Air pollution has had a significant history in the environmental racism history of Los Angeles. By engaging with this specific need in the community, the class became part of the greater historic struggle for environmental wellbeing and justice in hopes of future equity. Professor Honma's class embodied the concept of environmental justice being a "nexus," where various coalitions converge to confront a variety of environmental issues.<sup>121</sup> The college course would bring Asian American studies perspectives on social justice and community activism to the environmental justice project, while simultaneously the PYA program at Mark Keppel High would share an environmental justice-based experience with the Asian American studies course. Collaboration between Asian American studies and environmental justice activism expands the

---

<sup>121</sup> Sze and London, "Environmental Justice at the Crossroads."

traditional and exclusionary beginnings of environmentalism. The air sensors project highlights the “where people live, work and play” language that is at the core of the environmental justice movement, but is not often reflected in conventional understandings of environmentalism. Combining the two approaches to social justice challenges conventional environmentalism to engage with identity politics and move away from the color-blind mentality that stifles its justice-seeking potential.

Very little has been written about Asian American environmental justice organizing, which demonstrates the prevalent shortcomings of the perceived multi-ethnic and multicultural movement. Although the People of Color Leadership Summit established goals that aim for racial inclusion, the disparity between rhetoric and reality is still quite apparent. “In reality, Asian immigrant communities are taking the mantle of community activism and of the EJ issues that affect them in their own localities.”<sup>122</sup> Histories of exclusion and the model nonwhite myth increase the problem of Asian invisibility in multiracial activism. However, projects like the DIY air sensor creates space for Asian American environmental justice activism to be recognized in the mainstream movement and strengthen the role of identity formation in environmentalism. Asian American communities have approached environmental justice by organizing around a variety of social concerns, such as occupational issues, immigration status, and urban development that are not necessarily thought of as environmental. By addressing issues dealing with air pollution and health, Asian American studies and the Asian American environmental justice organizing that stems out of the scholarship changes the language around what constitutes the environment and places the urban landscape in the spaces that must be protected and advocated for.

---

<sup>122</sup> Julie Sze, “Asian American Activism for Environmental Justice,” *Peace Review* 16, no. 2 (June 2004): 149–56.

Asian American studies broaden what environmentalists consider environmental concerns and provide a scholarly framework to connect social justice coalitions that have historically struggled to find common ground and have relied on a narrow definition of environmental activism. Asian American environmental activism moves beyond traditional environmental justice studies by looking more closely on discussions of justice, culture, identity, and geography make up the allocation of social, health, and environmental benefits and burdens in a racialized landscape.<sup>123</sup> The community-based research conducted in the air sensor project concentrates on the symbolic and lived meanings of environmental justice activism by creating action from within the affected communities. Greater inclusion and recognition of Asian American activism in the framework of environmental justice follows the lofty goals set in the Summit and redefines the environment to include those who have been historically excluded and involuntarily absent. Asian American Activism in environmental justice emphasizes the underlying power dynamics in race formation and identity politics that create these unjust landscapes. The scholarship contextualizes environmental racism as spatial and the sites of injustice as results of social relationships that have been enforced by prejudiced policy. Projects like the air sensor research constructs environmentalism in another context.

Environmental justice activism provided a platform for people of color to gain resources for self-advocacy and the transformation of their communities. Community-based environmental justice research is a holistic approach that exemplifies the heart of a multifaceted environmental justice movement. Community-based research is defined as “research that is conducted by, with, or for communities.”<sup>124</sup> Environmental justice issues are becoming an important and growing focus of community-based environmental health research. The practitioners of the community-

---

<sup>123</sup> Sze, *Noxious New York : The Racial Politics of Urban Health and Environmental Justice*.

<sup>124</sup> Sze.

based research, which strengthens claims of environmental racism in the environmental justice movement, live and breathe the community-based settings—whereas their academic counterparts are housed in university settings that are rarely linked to the environmental justice movement. The air sensor project utilized a form of “street science” that has been seen in past air pollution initiatives and research.<sup>125</sup> Street science is defined as a “framework that joins local insights with professional scientific techniques, with concurrent goals to improve scientific inquiry and environmental health policy and decision making.”<sup>126</sup> Street science identifies hazards, usually related to health or the environment, and highlights research questions that professional scientists may ignore, provides data that is difficult to gather, collaborates with isolated populations, and expands the possibility for cooperation.<sup>127</sup> The air sensor project is part of environmental justice movement’s tradition of community-based science and research that challenges conventional practices of health and environmental risk assessment.

Street science does not aim to replace experts with the community, but fosters better conceptions of knowledge through a holistic understanding of how knowledge is produced. As one student reflected:

By using open-source resources and collaborating [with the high school] students, we were able to engage in a “bottom-up” approach that eliminated any sort of hierarchy between our class and the community we were working with. By combining all of our funds of knowledge and making use of the resources that were available to us, we were able to make this project a relative success....<sup>128</sup>

Consciously working against hierarchy formation is part of the environmental justice movement, and makes coalition formation more possible and genuine. Relative success is important in this

---

<sup>125</sup> Sze.

<sup>126</sup> Sze.

<sup>127</sup> Sze.

<sup>128</sup> Todd Honma, “Advancing Alternative Pathways to Science: Community Partnership, Do-It-Yourself (DIY)/Do-It-Together (DIT) Collaboration, and STEM Learning ‘from Below.’”

statement because it is acknowledging that the project did not produce the original end result, but the social consciousness that was produced is the main focus of environmental justice activism. Knowledge in the makerspace class was coproduced by local and professional coalitions—the Mark Keppel High School students and the Claremont College students and professor—to bring justice back into the mainstream framework of health, science, and policy. Environmental justice connects the work of Asian American studies to dismantle hegemonic formations of power with science and environmental issues. It provides a platform and tangible strategies in which communities can approach local environmental pollution that propels socio-spatial awareness at a larger scale. Community-based activism addressing environmental issues leaves those formerly in disadvantaged positions in the end empowered to continue engaging in political activism that creates sustainable and self-sufficient bottom-up social movements. The partnership in the makerspace class creates a variety of positive outcomes for its members: it organizes for environmental justice, creates a politically conscious youth movement, and furthers the immigrant rights movement. The two stakeholders, the Claremont Colleges and Mark Keppel High School, each have their own set of experiences and knowledge to bring to the makerspace air sensor project. By acknowledging the array of resources and knowledge each person's experience brings to the environmental justice movement, coalition-building forces separate social justice movements to ask important questions and reflect on their positionality in justice-seeking activism on a whole. What does Asian American studies bring to the environmental justice movement in this particular case? What does this project of the environmental justice movement do for Asian American studies scholarship? Who is being included and excluded from the conversation surrounding environmentalism? Why is multi-ethnic and multi-interest collaboration important? These kinds of questions that rise from coalition formation strengthen

the movement and create dialogue around the strategies and actions that must be taken to create a more cohesive justice seeking movement that continues beyond moments or specific sites of collaboration.

*Chapter overview: multidisciplinary environmental justice coalitions in Los Angeles*

Ktown Farms and the Mark Keppel High School air sensor project both have syncretic environmental justice organizing frameworks that are outcomes of the legacies of social justice movement building in Los Angeles from before and after 1992. The stakeholders in both examples were united under the common desire for justice and representation, creating a multidisciplinary, multi-issue, multi-ethnic approach to coalition building in environmental justice. These diverse coalitions facilitate collaboration based on different experiences with the racialized landscape, and strengthen the capacity and potential for justice. This kind of cross-discipline and multi-issue collaboration seen in KIWA and the air sensor project is creating a truly interdisciplinary environmental justice movement—one that is actively working to represent the goals set by the People of Color Summit and Los Angeles’ social justice organizing model post-1992. Both examples faced challenges in their just-seeking projects and experienced unexpected outcomes. However, returning to the discussion on practical syncretism, these examples of multidimensional justice coalition building have pushed the environmental justice framework to broaden its scope and work outside of accepted avenues for change. Thus, moving beyond specific outcomes and instead focusing on process, these examples are contributing to the greater long-term goal for social justice.



## **Conclusion**

### **Looking Back to Move Forward**

#### *Visit to KTown Farms Sites: a reflection on L.A.'s environmental justice movement*

On the corner of 3<sup>rd</sup> Avenue and west 15<sup>th</sup> Street, just south of West Pico Boulevard, lie various raised garden beds, watering cans, and wheelbarrows carrying potted plants. The garden beds are filled with soil that has been recently worked. Some have little rows and furrows drawn in the dirt waiting for seeds to be planted—other beds have already been harvested and only stalks and weeds remain. At the front of the urban garden stands a sign with the words “KTOWN FARMS: *A Project of KIWA*” carved into a piece of wood. I stood out front, checking the address on the porch and referring back to my notebook with the addresses I took from KIWA’s Ktown Farms web page. This was the place—one of the thirteen sites in Koreatown where KIWA had established its urban farming initiative.

During the research phase of this thesis, I decided to visit some of the sites I had been reading so much about. Regardless of the non-active status of the Ktown Farms project, I thought it was important to see physical sites of collective resistance, community-building, and community-based activism discussed in this work—no matter the measures of the project’s success. The former Ktown Farms sites are symbolic in Los Angeles’ environmental justice movement. On the surface, the urban gardens located in Koreatown were part of a larger movement advocating for green spaces in urban settings. Digging deeper, projects like Ktown Farms were made possible due to decades of developing the community unionism movement in the city of Los Angeles. KIWA is predominantly a labor-organizing worker center, but the flexibility and the adaptability of the community-based justice movement created a multidisciplinary organizing strategy. This interdisciplinary approach to justice paved way for collaboration between distinct social justice movements to continue organizing for a just future.

*What does Los Angeles teach us about Environmental Justice?*

This thesis has attempted to puzzle together the social, political, economic, and historical factors that have led up to the current environmental justice movement in Los Angeles. Looking at the city's social dynamics before the founding of the people of color identity in the environmental justice movement, it is clear that a unitary identity was crucial to the building of a multi-ethnic and multi-disciplinary movement. Organizing around identity would continue to transform as the 1992 riots left the Los Angeles social justice movement no other option but to reevaluate and transform the previous social justice organizing framework. A focus on immigrant rights, labor justice, and community-based activism would create a new L.A. organizing model that is organizing for environmental justice in cases like Ktown Farms and Mark Keppel High School. This project aims to connect these different strands and moments of social justice organizing to paint a clearer picture of how the environmental justice movement plays into the overall discussion of justice. Although this thesis has covered a variety of components that make up the story of the contemporary environmental justice, there are significant factors that are missing from this narrative. Making the connections between the frameworks of environmental justice, spatial justice, and practical syncretism, it is clear that this project is just the beginning of a holistic, comprehensive, and balanced analysis and documentation of the history of the Los Angeles environmental justice movement.

There is still ample room to pose questions that further the theoretical framework of the environmental justice movement to continue shaping a social justice movement that is capable of truly transforming the racialized landscape. The history of social justice organizing history in Los Angeles is long and ongoing. Today's vibrant activism network in Los Angeles is built upon decades of struggle, and its history provides activism scholarship with valuable lessons moving

forward. The dynamics of race and space are always changing—calling for a flexible movement that can address specific needs for justice but also maintain the path towards systemic change. The factors that influence the trajectories of social justice movements seem to always changing and up for contention, representation of history playing a large part in the formation of this perspective. However, people and power are what remain stable in these narratives for social justice. Marginalized communities are “exhausted by the daily violence of environmental degradation, racism, underemployment, overwork, shrinking social wages, and the disappearance of whole ways of life *and* those who lived them, nevertheless refuse to give up hope.”<sup>129</sup> To continue furthering the core goals of environmental and social justice movements, we must continue to listen, continue to learn, and continue to build to face the structural challenges of the racialized landscape. L.A. is an example of many different stories we must consider when imagining a more just, equitable, and sustainable future.

---

<sup>129</sup> Ruth Wilson Gilmore, “Forgotten Places and the Seeds of Grassroots Planning.”

## Works Cited

- “A Call to Action.” *Race, Poverty & the Environment* 2, no. 3/4 (1991): 30–31.
- “A Tale of Two Parks.” Liberty Hill Foundation, August 8, 2011.  
<https://www.libertyhill.org/2011/08/08/tale-of-two-parks>.
- “About KIWA.” KIWA Workers for Justice, 2017. <http://kiwa.org/about/>.
- Agyeman, Julian. *Sustainable Communities and the Challenge of Environmental Justice*. New York, UNITED STATES: NYU Press, 2005.  
<http://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/claremont/detail.action?docID=865319>.
- Benford, Robert. *The Half-Life of the Environmental Justice Frame: Innovation, Diffusion, and Stagnation*, 2005.
- Brady Collins. “THE WORKERS UNITED! MULTI-ETHNIC SOLIDARITY IN L.A.’S KOREATOWN.” *Hyphen Magazine*, January 28, 2015.  
<https://hyphenmagazine.com/blog/2015/01/workers-united-multi-ethnic-solidarity-las-koreatown>.
- Bullard, Robert D. “Phylon: Vol. 49, No. 3, 4, 2001 Environmental Justice in the 21st Century: Race Still Matters.” *Phylon* (1960-) 52, no. 1 (2015): 72–94.
- . *Unequal Protection : Environmental Justice and Communities of Color*. San Francisco : Sierra Club Books, 1994.
- Dana Alston. “The Summit: Transforming a Movement.” *The Summit* 2, no. 3/4 (1991).  
<http://www.reimaginerpe.org/20years/alston>.
- Edward W. Soja. *Seeking Spatial Justice*. Globalization and Community Series 16. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2010.
- Grace Lee. *K-TOWN’92*. Center for Asian American Media, 2017. [ktown92.com](http://ktown92.com).
- “History.” KIWA Workers for Justice, 2017. <http://kiwa.org/history/>.
- Holifield, Ryan. “Defining Environmental Justice and Environmental Racism.” *Urban Geography* 22, no. 1 (2013): 78–90.
- Jared Sanchez, Mirabai Auer, Veronica Terriquez, and Mi Young Kim. “Koreatown: A Contested Community at a Crossroads,” April 2012. [http://kiwa.flowcrow.com/wp-content/uploads/2011/05/Koreatown\\_Contested\\_Community\\_Crossroads\\_web.pdf](http://kiwa.flowcrow.com/wp-content/uploads/2011/05/Koreatown_Contested_Community_Crossroads_web.pdf).
- Juliana Maantay. “Asthma and Air Pollution in the Bronx: Methodological and Data Considerations in Using GIS for Environmental Justice and Health Research.” *Health & Place*, 13, no. 1 (March 2007): 32–56.
- Julie Sze. “Asian American Activism for Environmental Justice.” *Peace Review* 16, no. 2 (June 2004): 149–56.
- KOENEN, CONNIE. “South-Central Stops an Incinerator.” *Los Angeles Times*, December 23, 1991. [http://articles.latimes.com/1991-12-23/news/vw-830\\_1\\_incineration-plant](http://articles.latimes.com/1991-12-23/news/vw-830_1_incineration-plant).
- “Ktown Farms.” KIWA Workers for Justice, 2017. <http://kiwa.flowcrow.com/ktown-farms/>.
- Laura Pulido. “Development of the ‘People of Color’ Identity in the Environmental Justice Movement of the Southwestern United States.” *Socialist Review* 26 (1996): 145–80.
- Manuel Pastor, and Michele Prichard. “L.A. Rising: The 1992 Civil Unrest, the Arc of Social Justice Organizing, and the Lessons for Today’s Movement Building.” USC Program for Environmental and Regional Equity, April 2012.  
<https://www.scribd.com/document/228188770/L-A-Rising>.

- Marianne Lavelle, and Marcia Coyle. "Unequal Protection: The Racial Divide In Environmental Law, A Special Investigation," *The National Law Journal*, 15, no. 3 (September 21, 1992).
- Marks, Mara A., Matt A. Barreto, and Nathan D. Woods. "Race and Racial Attitudes a Decade after the 1992 Los Angeles Riots." *Urban Affairs Review* 40, no. 1 (September 1, 2004): 3–18. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1078087404264674>.
- Michael H. Schill, and Regina Austin. "Black, Brown, Poor & Poisoned: Minority Grassroots Environmentalism and the Quest for Eco-Justice." *Kansas Journal of Law and Public Policy*, 1991.
- Michael J. Dear, H. Eric Shockman, and Greg Hise, eds. "Multiracial Organizing Among Environmental Justice Activists in Los Angeles." In *Rethinking Los Angeles*, 171–89. United States of America: Sage Publications, Inc., 1996.
- Omi, Michael, and Howard Winant. In *Racial Formation in the United States*, Third edition., 48–91. New York : Routledge/Taylor & Francis Group, 2015.
- Ottinger, Gwen, and Benjamin R. Cohen. *Technoscience and Environmental Justice : Expert Cultures in a Grassroots Movement*. Cambridge, UNITED STATES: MIT Press, 2014. <http://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/claremont/detail.action?docID=3339290>.
- Pulido, Laura. *Black, Brown, Yellow, and Left: Radical Activism in Los Angeles*, c2006.
- . "Rethinking Environmental Racism: White Privilege and Urban Development in Southern California." *Annals of the Association of American Geographers* 90, no. 1 (March 1, 2000): 12–40. <https://doi.org/10.1111/0004-5608.00182>.
- Richard H. Schein. "Normative Dimensions of Landscape." In *Everyday America: Cultural Landscape Studies After J.B. Jackson*, 199–218. University of California Press, 2003.
- Ruth, Milkman, Joshua Bloom, and Victor Narro. *Working for Justice : The L.A. Model of Organizing and Advocacy*. NY, UNITED STATES: Cornell University Press, 2010. <http://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/claremont/detail.action?docID=3137959>.
- Ruth Wilson Gilmore. "Forgotten Places and the Seeds of Grassroots Planning." In *Engaging Contradictions: Theory, Politics, and Methods of Activist Scholarship*, edited by Charles R. Hale. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2008.
- Stanley, Anna. "Just Space or Spatial Justice? Difference, Discourse, and Environmental Justice." *Local Environment* 14, no. 10 (November 2009): 999–1014. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13549830903277417>.
- Sze, Julie. *Noxious New York : The Racial Politics of Urban Health and Environmental Justice*. 1 online resource (x, 282 pages) : illustrations, vols. Urban and Industrial Environments; Urban and Industrial Environments. Cambridge, Mass. : MIT Press, 2007. EBSCOhost <http://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&scope=site&db=nlebk&db=nlabk&AN=173441>.
- Sze, Julie, and Jonathan K. London. "Environmental Justice at the Crossroads." *Sociology Compass* 2, no. 4 (2008): 1331–54.
- "The First National People of Color Environmental Leadership Summit: Principles of Environmental Justice." *Race, Poverty & the Environment* 2, no. 3/4 (1991): 32–31.
- Todd Honma. "Advancing Alternative Pathways to Science: Community Partnership, Do-It-Yourself (DIY)/Do-It-Together (DIT) Collaboration, and STEM Learning 'from Below.'" *Transformations: The Journal of Inclusive Scholarship and Pedagogy* 27, no. 1 (2017): 41–50.

- “Toxic Waste and Race in the United States: A National Report on the Racial and Socio-Economic Characteristics of Communities with Hazardous Waste Sites.” the United Church of Christ Commission for Racial Justice, 1987.  
<https://www.nrc.gov/docs/ML1310/ML13109A339.pdf>.
- Victoria Kim. “How a Plan to Create a Much-Needed Park in Koreatown Withered - LA Times.” *LA Times*, April 15, 2016, sec. Local/California.  
<http://www.latimes.com/local/california/la-me-koreatown-park-20160415-story.html>.
- Walker, Gordon. “Beyond Distribution and Proximity: Exploring the Multiple Spatialities of Environmental Justice.” *Antipode* 41, no. 4 (September 1, 2009): 614–36.  
<https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-8330.2009.00691.x>.
- Wolch, Jennifer, John P. Wilson, and Jed Fehrenbach. “Parks and Park Funding in Los Angeles: An Equity-Mapping Analysis.” *Urban Geography* 26, no. 1 (2005): 4–35.